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13 February 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Vietnam

1. In the aftermath of the Communist Tet offensive most observers have agreed on the need to suspend judgment until more data is available. Nevertheless, such avowals have been quickly followed by broad judgments ranging from the blackest pessimism to the wildly optimistic. Inevitably, judgments concerning the objective situation in Vietnam have been mixed with and influenced by a complex of attitudes on the justification or lack thereof of our policy in the area and its impact on life in the US and our posture in the world at large. Perhaps a non-emotional approach to the problem is no longer possible for anyone with any sense of involvement. (Many of us have been involved, in one way or another since at least 1950 and can point to this or that estimate, recommendation, or action which if properly followed through by wise statesmen and soldiers would have avoided our present frustration and malaise.)

2. But here we are and our first responsibility is to assess the capabilities and intentions of our adversaries and the will and

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competence of our friends. Over the past two weeks the general trend has been to inflate the power of the former and to derogate the performance of the latter.

3. An objective appraisal of the Communist position should begin with the understanding that the winter-spring campaign -- in both its military and political aspects -- does represent a radical shift in tactics. Beginning last fall with the battles of Loc Ninh and Dakto, we witnessed a departure from the low risk approach of a protracted war effort and the switch to a determined effort to force a relatively early and successful conclusion of the conflict. This new strategy was impelled, not by a sense of great strength, but by a realization in Hanoi that the US/GVN effort in South Vietnam was gathering momentum, that manpower in the South was increasingly being denied to the Viet Cong, and that a war of resistance in the South based on a predominately northern force was not politically viable. In brief, Hanoi calculated that the strain of the war could not be borne indefinitely and that something drastic had to be done to retrieve the situation.

4. The Tet offensive itself, far from demonstrating unexpected Communist strength (give it excellent marks for daring,

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fair marks for coordination), confirmed the low state to which many local Viet Cong units had fallen. In Saigon a large number of inexperienced, recently impressed young men were used in attacks on key targets. It also appears that many local Viet Cong units had to be stiffened by North Vietnamese replacements. Surely, if better trained Viet Cong units familiar with the street plans of the various towns and cities had been available they would have been used, possibly to decisive effect. The failure of main force units -- Viet Cong and NVA -- to follow up quickly to exploit the confusion of initial attacks shows poor coordination, a lack of confidence, or both.

5. It might be said that the hoped for effect on the GVN was worth the sacrifice of the poorly trained local units and even their experienced cadre. But this does not detract from the argument that the Tet attacks are further evidence of high risk tactics on Hanoi's part. Many of the attacks were in fact carried out by Main Force units -- Viet Cong and NVA. Hanoi could not be sure that surprise would be achieved; they were risking substantial losses of trained manpower. And as it turned out, losses to these units -- as in Kontum -- were high even with surprise. Exposing the 2nd NVA Division in the vicinity of Danang-Hoi-Hu

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where it was badly beaten between 8-10 February makes no sense except in terms of a high risk determined effort for an early and decisive impact on the ARVN, the GVN, and the US.

6. Obviously, the military punishment which Communist forces took last fall along the Cambodian border, around the cities during Tet, and around Khe Sanh over the past month has not forced Hanoi to call off its major effort. The scenario is far from played out and the Communists probably have other surprises yet to spring. More NVA Divisions can be committed across the DMZ, new Soviet-made weapons can be introduced, Viet Cong units can be replenished by impressment from the unprotected countryside, perhaps Khe Sanh can be over run by a maximum effort. But Communist forces in the field are not composed of supermen, they continue to demonstrate the inability to coordinate actions closely, to meet readiness deadlines, to stand up to the superior fire power and mobility of US/ARVN forces. Their chances of success continue to rest heavily on destroying the will and effectiveness of the ARVN and GVN.

7. The failures of the ARVN and the GVN are, of course, the source of much of our pessimism and frustration. We want or expect the GVN to snap to, vitalize national administration,

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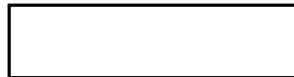
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raise taxes, weed out corruption, get cracking on pacification, stimulate democracy, and generally win the hearts and minds of the people. Progress toward many of these objectives in the short term is quite unrealistic in view of the cultural inertia of a traditional confucian society and quite out of the question in the midst of a major war. Perhaps the US should be encouraged by the simple fact that a government of sorts has now been in continuous control since the emergence of Ky and Thieu in 1966. Certainly the GVN and the ARVN could and should do more -- the ARVN a good deal more -- to make the overall political and military effort more effective. But perhaps if we had expected a little less we would be more willing to acknowledge that some progress had been made before Tet, that ARVN and GVN reactions during Tet were not so futile, that South Vietnamese morale has stood up amazing well over the past two weeks, and that the outlook is not totally black. Obviously, if the US wavers at this juncture, the entire structure could unravel quickly.* But there is still no

* And if this should happen there would, of course, be no chance for a "satisfactory" negotiation to ease the US departure from Vietnam. Whether or not the US should take this opportunity to shed its burdens and make a fast exit is another matter. The point here simply is that it would have no alternative if it appeared now to reduce its commitments.

evidence of a widespread preference for the Communists in South Vietnam, even if there is little evidence of a passionate loyalty to the GVN. (Ho Chi Minh may be a popular nationalist figure in Vietnam, this does not mean that his party shares in this esteem either in North or South Vietnam.)

8. Thus, the issue remains in doubt. The Communists have risked much already, including their prestige and the morale of their forces. Many of their regular units have been subjected to prolonged and continuous harassment and attrition. If they back off now and return to a protracted war line they will risk an adverse reaction among their less committed adherents in the South who have been sustained by hopes of an early end to the war. Meanwhile, the strains of the war which led to the adoption of high risk tactics will still be there. If they continue to commit their resources in all out effort over the next few months and fail to achieve their purpose they will be in an even less advantageous position to prolong the fighting.



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